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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that reflective practice is an important approach for professional and staff development, this paper discusses the use of the teaching portfolio approach to improving reflection and reflective practices among early childhood education staff. The teaching portfolio approach involves collecting evidence of best practices; developing a framework of core competencies and professional values; encouraging a system of collegiality, collaborative and peer learning; and recognizing and rewarding reflective innovative practices. The paper discusses the results of three surveys of tertiary institution staff to determine authentic evidences that would be useful for demonstrating their competence and professionalism as educators. The survey results are then used as a base to discuss materials to be collected in the teaching portfolio to substantiate the early childhood education teacher's experience, competence, development, and professional achievements. Finally, the paper discusses the framework of core objectives and values for a portfolio approach as outlined by the Staff and Educational Development Association of the United Kingdom. Issues in implementing this portfolio approach are also considered. (JPB)

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REFLECTIVE TEACHING AND THE PORTFOLIO APPROACH

IN EARLY CHILDHOOD STAFF DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been a plethora of research and literature suggesting that reflective practice is an important approach for professional and staff development (eg Schon, 1987; Adler, 1991; Schon, 1991; Boud and Walker, 1991; Boud, et al; 1985; Ramsden, 1992). Reflective practice is also a key aspect of the well-known experiential learning model (Kolb and Fry, 1995; Kolb, 1976). Kolb's experiential learning model outlines four stages of learning : concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. This learning cycle is often adapted and adopted by many staff development programmes.

The rationale for this model in staff development is that whilst we learn from experience, it is critical for us to reflect on the experience and discuss it to optimise our learning. Through analysis and generalisation one would then be able to experiment on and improve upon practices and be better prepared to meet new experiences. As Boud, et al (1985) noted, it appears that in practice the skill which people are most deficient in is reflection. Apparently, encouraging reflective practice and bringing about quality reflection in education can be a rather sophisticated process. According to Schon (1991) reflective practice involves thinking while acting and responding to situations of uncertainty, uniqueness and conflict. Reflection involves "the reconstruction of knowledge" and "the ability to apprehend practice settings" and also "self-critique" and "institutional critique".

This paper addresses two questions from a staff and education development perspective in early childhood education. How can we improve reflection and reflective practices among early childhood staff ? How can this improvement in practice be made more evident? The paper will attempt to demonstrate and share a practical approach , the "portfolio approach" for the encouragement of reflective practice. This approach entails collecting evidences of "best" practices, developing a framework of core competencies and professional values, encouraging a system of collegiality, collaborative and peer learning and recognising and rewarding reflective innovative practices .

EARLY CHILDHOOD STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The following concepts are related to a broad description of staff development in the field of early childhood education. These have been commonly adopted and accepted and they are:

- the personal, professional and organisational needs for early childhood educators at all levels are to be met.
- all forms of human potential are to be enhanced.
- the knowledge, attitudes, skills and dispositional needs of staff have to be met to improve children's learning.
- a continual and continuous learning and improvement for excellence in early childhood education are important considerations.

Among the many principles which may be related to staff development, these include enabling institutions to make improvements, creating "self-developing institutions", establishing collaborative teams for quality improvements, recognising reflective practices and emphasising the basis of a profession. A few practical considerations are often highlighted. These are establishing clear objectives, meeting diverse needs, making available resource people, monitoring feedback, planning collaboratively, offering appropriate reward and incentive structure and adequate formal appraisal and evaluation.

Authentic Evidences for Competencies

Three mini-surveys were conducted on the staff of a tertiary institution to obtain some initial ideas to determine authentic evidences that would be useful and credible for demonstrating their competencies and professionalism as educators.

The first survey allows the staff to decide and determine the kind of evidences that would be practical and sufficiently authentic. A total of 166 teaching staff took part in the survey carried out at the beginning of an academic staff development programme. The staff involved were generally new lecturers but they include all departments in the campus The results of the survey revealed that there was much agreement on the types and nature of evidences they would supply. The most frequently cited evidences were student feedback, teaching materials developed, records and data on students' progress students' performance and the quality of students' project work and assignment. Teaching appraisal and research publication were frequently cited . The least frequently cited evidences include self-assessment records, teaching diaries and reflective journals.

The second survey was more of an observation and literature review. Twelve university staff development programmes were examined closely to obtain some important features. Two common objectives were revealed . Staff development programmes seek to widen the knowledge base on teaching and learning and the repertoire of effective practices and also to foster a habit of reflective teaching for good and innovative practices.

Several of these programmes mentioned explicitly that the experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1976) provides the model and basis for reflection and improvement of practices in their course. A chief aim is that of reflective practice for continuous improvement.Passing examinations is not a relevant means of assessment in many of these programmes . It is important to consider other means of evidences to authenticate improvement and development.

The third mini-survey involved 85 academic staff. The survey required them to list what they saw as "roles and competencies of an effective academic staff". This mini survey revealed the following broad categories of comments:

1. High standards of professionalism in design, delivery, assessment and evaluation of courses. These cover good knowledge of subject matter, effective communication

skills, good classroom management skills, course design and lesson planning skills, harnessing information technology for teaching, effective facilitation skills and student assessment skills..

2 Quality academic support practices. These include ability to help and counsel students in their academic work, facilitation of process learning and study skills.

3 Efficient handling of essential administrative tasks. These involve administrative work and committees that staff are expected to handle such as those under time-tabling, examinations and course publicity.

4 Inculcating professional attitudes, life long learning and social skills. These involve helping students acquire positive work attitudes, interpersonal and communication skills, service quality mindset and becoming a life long learner.

5 Pastoral Roles. These involve actingacting as care persons to provide pastoral care and counseling pertaining to understanding problems faced by late teenagers and coping problems.

6 Being developing and up-to-date professionals. These relate to areas such continuing professional development, ability to do research, publish and being a consultant in their field of expertise.

The three mini-surveys indicate the potential of a wide variety of sources as evidences upon which staff could demonstrate their competencies and achievement. It was significantly revealed that staff could use more reflection in their ongoing professional and personal development.

The Portfolio Approach

Effective professionals and practitioners especially in early childhood education should have their skills and competencies demonstrated in various work situations which are very varied in the field. Valuable learning from the kindergartens and elementary school situations can be derived as staff continue to develop and improve. The value of documenting these professional reflective experiences by means of a teaching portfolio has been seriously considered in research circles. This approach has been in the last decade been applied at all levels in schools, colleges and universities.

Essentially, a teaching portfolio is a collection of materials and documents to substantiate a teacher's experience, competence, development and achievements in his profession. It should be an organised and credible documentation of accomplishments in various tasks related to teaching and learning. Moreover, it is a systematic collection of documentary evidences with reflective commentary to authenticate one's professional attainment and development.

Based on the findings from the mini-surveys, it was suggested that what is needed is a systematic and comprehensive framework, using the portfolio approach within which one could collect his evidences. Such a framework should contain objectives related to core competencies of an educator's role and be based on his/her professional values. In this way, it would be possible to set standards of best practices.

A Framework of Core Objectives and Values

A portfolio approach that has a clear framework linked to reflective practice has been most systematically developed by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) of the United Kingdom. SEDA is today the principal organisation in the UK for the promotion of staff development amongst UK universities. Its role in encouraging innovation and good practice in teaching and learning in higher education has been well recognised by higher education bodies, government agencies and universities. SEDA was formed in 1993 as a merger of the Standing Committee on Educational Development and the Society for Research in Higher Education Staff Development Group. The organisation is strongly supported by many vice chancellors, professors of higher education, staff developers and staff of many universities.

As Lublin (1996) noted, the SEDA Higher education Teacher Accreditation scheme is probably the only scheme in the English speaking world that has produced such a comprehensive framework with a means for accreditation. By looking at the three mini-studies and the SEDA framework, it is easy to see the agreement between staff perception of competencies and undepinning objectives and values in the SEDA scheme. The kind of evidences required for the fulfilment of the SEDA objectives and values are very much what staff perceived as evidences that are relevant to their competencies.

The SEDA underpinning principles and values are as follows:
*understanding how students learn
*recognising individual differences in learning
*concern for students' development
*scholarship and commitment to high standards of achievement
*collaborative and team working
*practising equal opportunities
*relection and professional development

The SEDA core objectives and outcomes include the folowing:
*effectiveness in the design of teaching programmes
*use of a wide range of appropriate teaching and learning methods
*proven effectiveness of academic support
*effective provision of pastoral support
*use of a wide range of assessment techniques with emphasis on enabling student motivation and progress
*use of a wide range of self, peer and student evaluation.
*effective performance of administrative tasks

*development of personal and professional coping strategies
*proven reflective practice
*continual assessment of one's developmental needs
*evidence of planning for professional development

The following tables describe in greater detail the SEDA values and objectives respectively. Many of the terms used in the underpinning principles and the objectives can be defined in more than one way and staff are encouraged to reflect, make and justify their own definition of such terms. In the accreditation scheme a teacher will be accredited if they demonstrate that they have met each of the eight objectives in a way which reflects each of the seven underpinning principles with their portfolio of evidences.

Implementing the Portfolio Approach

Subsequent to the three mini-surveys, the portfolio approach has been adopted both formally in the Teaching in Higher Certificate staff programme as well as more informally for encouraging continuous development amongst staff. This particular tertiary institution is the first outside the UK to have its staff programme accredited by SEDA.

Staff are encouraged to use the SEDA framework to compile their portfolios. Apart from workshop sessions , staff are also formed into peer action learning groups to share and assess each other's portfolio. Amongst other observations, the portfolio approach for staff development has become a potentially powerful mechanism in encouraging collaborative learning, innovative teaching, values and theories development and reflective thinking .

The quality of work related to the various teaching roles is shown in the samples of genuine evidences given. For example, effectiveness of teaching in a large group is seen in the records of peer observation, self-evaluation of teaching , video recording and student feedback. Staff reflection indicate awareness of teaching strengths and weaknesses. Samples of teaching materials are shared and improved upon.

Portfolio evidences do not stop at raw materials alone. They are usually accompanied by more notes or write-ups. The reflective commentaries often include analyses of how theoretical knowledge and understanding has been developed and applied.. The quality of reflection is thus increased as lecturers learn to articulate and make public their reflections on various practices such as how they go about assessing project work and giving feedback to students. Eventually they are able to develop and share their own "theories" about different aspects of teaching and learning such as ways to best motivate certain groups of students and how students learn best for a particular subject. Many of the staff have improved in their teaching using technology to help them. Multi-media and computer-assisted learning packages and instruction videos have become more prolific. Online and internet facilities have been included in their innovative practices.

Collaborative practice is also enhanced as sharing with concrete evidences meant that many things are experienced and not just ideas or thought-experiments. Such

collaborative practices are also opportunities for lecturers to work on issues of common concern or joint efforts in various projects. Such practices in many ways approximate the models of experiential learning and action research. The portfolio is becoming a complement and proposed alternative to the traditional method of staff appraisal in teaching . Less emphasis is given to the one-time observation of teaching and the regular but standard student feedback method. Staff are empowered to present their own evidences of effectiveness through the portfolio.

Conclusion

No one approach can be comprehensive enough to capture the diverse needs of staff development especially in early childhood education . There are at the same time many limitations in formalising a portfolio approach for professional development. Problems encountered include the issue of time needed to compile the portfolio and to vary widely the standards and quality of evidences. It would be harder for older staff to be inducted into such a culture of collaboration, peer sharing of evidences and reflection as traditionally, academic staff tended to be individualistic and more concerned with their own research and field of expertise. Nevertheless, with the call for continuous improvement, quality assurance and greater teamwork, the portfolio approach has much relevance for staff development. The approach also holds promise for it to be used with action research, peer assessment and staff appraisal.

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Underpinning principles and values The accredited teacher has shown how these principles and values underpin their work:
1 How students learn All teaching, academic administration and pedagogic research should be informed by an active searching out of a better understanding of how students learn. 2 Individual differences Helping students to learn must begin with a recognition that each student has his/her own learning needs, and brings their own knowledge and resources to the learning process. 3 Development Education is about the development of students' existing skills, knowledge and attitudes, and their confidence in themselves, so that they can take responsibility for their own learning. Our work with students should therefore empower and enable them to develop greater capability and competence for their personal and professional lives. 4 Scholarship At the base of a teacher's competence is an awareness and acknowledgement of the ideas and theories of others. All teaching should be underpinned by a searching out of new knowledge and a passing on to students of a questioning and analytical approach. 5 Collaborative working Much of our work as teachers is carried out as part of a team made up of teaching staff and academic support staff. The colleagueship and support of peers is as important as individual academic excellence. 6 Equal opportunities Everything a teacher does should be informed by Equal Opportunities legislation, policy an best practice. This requires an understanding of equal opportunities in the curriculum and institutions. 7 Reflection Teachers, like all other professionals, are more than competent. They also reflect on their intentions and their actions, and on the effects of their actions. They try to understand the reasons for what they see and the effects of their actions. They thus continue to develop their understanding and practice, and therefore inform their own learning.

Table SEDA Underpinning Principles and Values

Objectives and outcomes The accredited teacher has shown how they have:
1. Designed a teaching programme from a course outline, document or syllabus. This may include: Writing objectives and learning outcomes; Structuring the teaching programme to meet the needs of learners; Choosing teaching methods appropriate to the group of learners, the mode of study, the subject material and the resources available; Choosing appropriate assessment methods to test the attainment of learning outcomes.
2. Used a wide and appropriate range of teaching and learning methods effectively and efficiently, to work with large groups, small groups and one-to-one. This may include: Making presentations (e.g. lectures, demonstrations); Facilitating group learning (e.g. through seminars, discussion groups, projects); Working with individual learners; Where appropriate, facilitating practical or laboratory classes; Contributing to team teaching; Using effectively the appropriate technology for the teaching and learning method (e.g. OHP, whiteboard, chalkboard, handouts, and IT).
3. Provided support to students on academic and pastoral matters. This may include: Working in a way which takes account of individual student needs and perspectives; Reviewing with students their progress; Offering educational guidance, and where necessary referring to specialist services; Negotiating and working within appropriate boundaries.
4. Used a wide range of assessment techniques to assess student work and to enable students to monitor their own progress. This may include: Generating and using assessment criteria; Giving feedback to students; Justifying gradings.
5. Used a range of self, peer and student monitoring and evaluation techniques. This may include: Monitoring their own teaching; Evaluating their teaching programmes; Contributing to the evaluation of courses on which they teach.
6. Performed effectively the teaching support and academic administrative tasks involved in their departments and institutions. This may include: Keeping appropriate records; Using the timetabling, accounting etc.language and procedures; Being an effective member of appropriate groups e.g. course team, course committee, assessment board.
7. Developed personal and professional coping strategies within the constraints and opportunities of their institutional setting. This may include Adequately managing their time and administration to cope with the pressures of the job; Operating successfully within available resources; Recognising and managing stress; Working with change.
8. Reflected on their own personal and professional practice and development, assessed their future development needs, and made a plan for their continuing professional development.

Table SEDA Outcomes and Objectives